

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nepal: Prospects and Challenges

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In this article I discuss some of the aspects that pertain to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Nepali context. More specifically, drawing from the articles which explicate the prevalence of ODL in developing countries, I delineate on the prospects and challenges of ODL in Nepalese context. As such, I explore fundamental aspects of popularly designated alternative paths to the traditional mode of learning.

Background

The beginning of ODL is assigned back to 18th Century, that is, the time of phenomenal advancement and innovation in transportation and communication heralded by industrial revolution. In Desmond Keegan's account, ODL started when technology made it feasible to separate teacher and learner from a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained. An alternative micro level account, *i.e.*, at the level of individual, invokes the name of Isaac Pitman (in 1840 Britain) as the precursor of this mode with his initiation of modern correspondence education.

Started with correspondence mode, ODL is now agreed to have undergone notably four other stages namely multimedia model, tele-learning model, flexible learning model and interactive flexible learning model (Taylor). The proliferation suffices to prove why ODL has been so widely accepted in the western hemisphere and why European countries have established and recognized this method through European Distance Education Network (EDEN).

Compared to the genesis of ODL in the west, its official and documented history in South Asian Countries (SAC), however, is shorter. The table below shows the history of open and distance learning in the SAC ^[1].

Table 1: History of Open University in SAC ^[2]

Country	Year	Institute
Afghanistan		None
Bangladesh	1985	Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE)/ Bangladesh Open University was established in 1992.
Bhutan		None
India	1982	Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU), formerly known as Andhra Pradesh Open University/ The National Open University of India was established in 1985.
Maldives	1999	Tertiary Institute for Open Learning; the institute was under The Maldives National University
Pakistan	1974	Allama Iqbal Open University (AIU)
Sri Lanka	1980	Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSC)

Though offered very lately, ODL in SAC has been gaining an increased attention and thereby a phenomenal growth in recent years. The change can best be described as the move of ODL from marginal to integral part of overall educational provision.

Introduction

In Nepalese context, ODL offered by the state's own establishment carries no history in the sense that the government's plan to establish Open University Nepal (OUN) has yet not been materialized. Hence, ODL in relation to OUN can be discussed only at the level of efforts made ^[3]. The government's initial endeavour can be located in the very year when Nepali Government became a signatory of SAARC Consortium to Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL) in 1999. Wagle recall of the government's effort for Open University also establishes 1990 as a starting point:

The MoE (Ministry of Education) itself constituted an Open Learning and Distance Education (OLDE) Committee in 1999 under the chairmanship of then Secretary of Education to suggest the government with modalities of OLDE in Nepal. The Committee comprising OLDE experts suggested the government with alternatives of programs and resources. (*The Himalayan Times*)

Nonetheless, the report, Wagle writes very sarcastically, must be gathering dust in some cabinet of the MoE even today. Since 1999 the agenda does not seem to have occupied any importance for around a decade. Exactly after eleven years, *i.e.*, in October 2010, another notable [might be more optimistic effort from the government due to collaborative nature of the venture: MoE and Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) have signed in the agreement to start Open University Nepal (OUN)] move appears visible. The proposed OUN has included the following major objectives:

- Close the gap in higher education demand, currently unmet by the combined capacity of all the institutions, through open and distance mechanisms.
- Take tertiary education to the rural, remote, and marginalized people of Nepal, especially women and Dalits, who are practically confined to the villages due to family obligations, social challenges, and financial constraints.
- Provide opportunities for teachers and government employees who are unable to advance their education, skills and careers while living in rural and remote places, or to those who are unemployed.
- Provide a mechanism to continue education for the youth who take temporary or permanent employment in foreign countries.
- Advance a computer-based education to rural Nepal that relates to health, social-systems, productivity, economic improvement, and sustainability disciplines.

(Source: Rasali, Adhikari and Dhakal)

The outcome of the effort, however, has been only a ray of hope for the advocates of ODL. In a context when the plan is in incubation period, writing on the prospect of ODL might sound highly phantasmagoric. Here, I caution my readers not to harness total skepticism mainly for two reasons: first, the government of Nepal along with a promising partner has declared an Open University as a viable and appropriate means to provide mass access to tertiary education; second, ODL has already been in operation since the turn of century in Nepal through accredited universities such as Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

Prospects

ODL by its nature carries promising features such as egalitarianism, equality of educational opportunities, flexible curricula (Peters). Consequently, the mode bears

significant potential to widen access to higher education which in Nepalese context has appeared very tough due to various constraints. The following elements appear to create noteworthy scope for ODL.

Availability of Learners

The inability of Nepali government to tackle the difficulties brought by diversity, whether prevalent in the form of structural inequality or geographical inaccessibility or socio-political hierarchies, had stood as a major barrier for a large population in appropriate access to education. Education opportunities were inappropriately decentralized, if not totally centralized, and thus any individual other than well-to-do economic status could not get enrolled for higher qualification. I vividly remember my father narrating his odyssey to Dharan from Khotang to study intermediate level. Many people who could not afford to make such bold decision (I am sure this number is large) could hardly own even fundamental qualifications required to take hold of opportunities which were available. And, the situation is true even now: they cannot claim for any of the provisions made by the governments firstly (though scantily) after the restoration of Democracy in 1991 and secondly after the end of Maoist Armed Conflict in 2006.

A very paradoxical situation ensnares these people now: they have opportunities but not the required qualifications. The situation thereby produces foundational reason to demand for educational qualification which does not look viable through traditional mode of education. The availability of learners due to this necessity has further increased at the acceleration of peace process. We have a large number of cadres who had joined Maoist revolution after 1996 leaving their studies are now in need of education as they have been placed back to society. The two-fold availability, along with other elements such as outbound mobility of students for foreign universities, would be productive factors in pulling learners to ODL mechanism.

Ample Libraries

Libraries in Nepal have grown phenomenally especially after the restoration of Democracy in 1991. Now, we live the condition neither of a group of young students in 1930 who were charged of sedition as they applied for permission to start a public library (the Sarawasti Public Library) nor of students who suffered in 1960 when the king dismissed Nepal's first elected government and closed public libraries established in the fifties. As the study of Koirala and Bird has outlined, post 1991 has provided appropriate environment for, "re-opening of a number of rural community libraries which were closed during monarchy". Similarly, a large number of INGOs such as Room to Read, and Read Nepal have been asking for government's permission to "support for community libraries". Consequently, the number of libraries in Nepal has increased from about 400 in 1990 to about 800 in 2003 (Shrestha qtd in Koirala and Bird). The quality and quantity of library has further been enhanced both by INGOs like Rural Development and Education (READ) and Room to Read, and by foreign mission libraries such as the American Library, British Council Learning Centre, Bharat Sanskritic Kendra.

Though all the libraries, especially the ones located in rural areas, might not have ample and required books, their infrastructure can be used for ODL.

Contribution from Diaspora

One of the most optimistic aspects in ODL comes from the promise of contribution from Nepali Diaspora. The group, like the population of this type elsewhere, undergoes

ambivalent position: on the one hand, they meagerly wish to return their home country but on the other, they wish to see the country prospered and plan to contribute without returning. Rasali, Adhikari and Dhakal have fairly outlined the nature of potential input from the Diaspora due to their empathy for people at home:

There are a sizable number of highly qualified academics and professionals among Nepalese Diaspora, who are eager to help their motherland. Having benefited originally from the Nepal's investment in public education and having had a first-hand experience of her needs, many of them are also eager to give back to the native land. Several members of this Diaspora group have themselves experienced the hopelessness caused by poverty, have walked barefoot to attend schools in the mountains and plains, and have faced acute shortage of books and other educational facilities when they pursued their education in Nepal. As many of them have succeeded in obtaining world class education in spite of these insurmountable barriers, they understand the pain and frustrations of the rural poor and marginalized groups and their struggle for education, and know that success is still possible. Because of these reasons, they are well suited to help education in Nepal through open and distance learning and support the neediest groups.

The agreement made in October 2010 between MoE and NRNA regarding the latter's contribution in ODL stands as a remarkable gesture of the potential.

Challenges

Challenges in ODL are inherent to the characteristics of this mode. Since it espouses values of flexibility and accessibility, it assumes learners to have sense of both autonomy and responsibility for learning. Before I discuss on the problems that start due to the collusion of two elements, I find it worthy to quote Rennie and Mason's conclusion on the impediments in distance and distributed learning in Nepal and Bhutan:

Firstly, Internet access is improving rapidly, but is still generally too weak and inconsistent to allow any reliance on net-based learning solutions. Secondly, the academic culture is resistant to the recognition of the value of open-learning degrees, with subsequent difficulties in re-designing course materials for a more educationally flexible, student-centred learning environment.

Certainly, the ambivalent position of scholars ^[4] on the degree from ODL and the problems of internet access for learners account as major impediments. Leaving aside the skepticism of these scholars, there are other more important factors which make ODL more challenging. One of them, as already mentioned props up from the dialectics of autonomy and responsibility. In Nepalese context, learners' autonomy which should be curbed by the sense of responsibility exists in very peculiar situation. Learner's sense of autonomy often overrides their sense of responsibility. Simply stated, many learners tend to carry no responsibility in pedagogic assumptions in ODL. In turn, the tendency might culminate in using ODL as mere formality for awarding and getting certificate.

Unconducive Political Environment

Political environment in Nepal especially after the restoration of Democracy in 1991 has been constantly unstable. The phenomena such as frequent change of governments and thereby blockage of policies formulated by former government has been hindrance for any initiative. Institutions which are already in operation do not generally suffer; but the institutions like OUN which are in the making face major hindrance due to political instability. Wagle's account succinctly presents this problem:

The education minister makes the commitment, but how long will he stay in the MoE? By the time the university bill is passed by the parliament, he may already have been out of the government because of the fluid politics of Nepal. That means another minister would have to understand the whole process again.

Lack of Electrification

ODL relies heavily on advancement and proliferated use of media and communication. More specifically, educationists need to rely on novel methods of imparting knowledge such as the internet and e-mail, telephone, CD-Roms, print materials, video cassettes and video-conferencing. All these devices need uninterrupted supply of electricity, which in Nepalese context sounds highly unlikely. Power cut has been so severe that electricity avails to us in many months only for around 6-8 hours in a day.

Conclusion

The proliferation and thereby acknowledgement of ODL both in developing and developed countries imply the mode's significant potential. However, this does not mean that ODL will replace the traditional mode as euphorically supposed by scholars such as Ramanujam, "the present dominance of campus based higher education may become a thing of the past perhaps by the middle of the next century, if not earlier than that" (126). In the developing countries like Nepal, ODL has apparent scope due to the availability of learners, accessibility to libraries and promise from prospective collaborators. But, we have challenges such as uncondusive political environment, lack of electrification, skepticism from some scholars regarding the strength of degree making the task of tackling almost herculean.

Notes

[1] I have included only the State Universities which offer courses in ODL mode.

[2] I have relied heavily on internet sites though I have cross-checked many sites, I regret any discrepancies.

[3] Read Wagle's articles to understand how private sector has put efforts
<http://www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=Open+University+&NewsID=283434>.

[4] Some scholars blindly believe that anyone who has acquired degree through distance mode does not have skills as much as it is required for being in the profession. Though ridiculous due to over generalizing and egoistic tendency in the argument, we still have this population in academia.

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